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Robert Fishko, *Director*

RAPHAEL SOYER

(1899-1987)

Under the Bridge, c. 1932

oil on canvas

26 1/4 x 32 1/8 inches

Provenance

The Artist

Dr. Arnold Lieber and Mary Soyer Lieber

(by descent)

Private Collection, NY



Exhibited

Raphael Soyer

Traveling exhibition:

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

William Hayes Ackland Memorial Art Center, 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

Modern Spirit, Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1977, cat. no. 145

[Mrs. Mary Soyer Lieber, New York]

Les Realismes, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France,

December 17, 1980 – April 20, 1981 [Mary Soyer Lieber and Arnold Lieber]

Raphael Soyer's New York: People & Places

Traveling exhibition

Arthur A. Houghton Jr. Gallery, The Cooper Union, New York, NY,

October 3 – November 9, 1984

Boston University Art Gallery, Boston, MA, November 15 – December 9, 1984

Raphael Soyer: Twenty Great Paintings, Forum Gallery, New York, NY,
January 19 – March 4, 1995

Old New York and the Artists of the Period 1900-1941, Nassau County Museum of Art,
Roslyn Harbor, NY, August 19 – November 4, 2001 (Ms. Mary Soyer)

Landmarks of 20th Century American Art, Forum Gallery, New York, NY
November 8, 2018 – January 5, 2019

Literature

Raphael Soyer, American Artists Group, New York, 1946, monograph no. 19, p. 9,
Illustrated (Artist's Collection).

Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 1967,
no. 14, p. 30, Illustrated and p. 76, Listed. (Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Arnold Lieber)

Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*, H.N. Abrams, New York, NY, 1972, p. 18-19, Referenced
and p. 58-59, Illustrated.

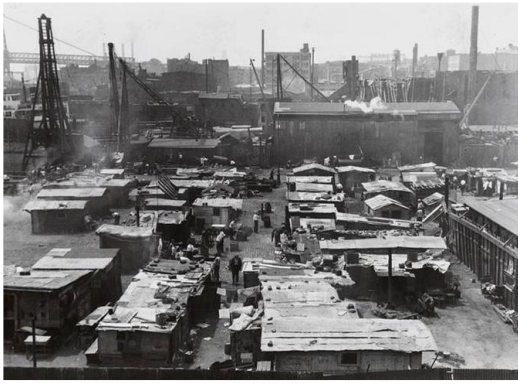
Hills, Patricia. *Raphael Soyer's New York: People & Places*, Arthur A. Houghton Jr.
Gallery, The Cooper Union, New York, NY, 1984, no. 11, p. 8, Illustrated. (Collection of
Mary Soyer)

Krulik, Barbara S. *Raphael Soyer: Twenty Great Paintings*, Forum Gallery, New York, NY,
1995, pp. 10-11, Illustrated.

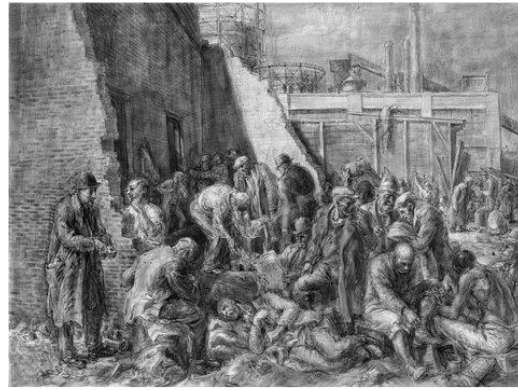
Brooker, Niccolo. *Landmarks of 20th Century American Art*, Forum Gallery, New York,
NY, 2018, pp. 110-115 and p. 111, Illustrated.

Essay

As an artist, Raphael Soyer came of age just as the Great Depression began, and he painted some of his most widely remembered canvases during the 1930s and early 1940s in New York City. He depicted the reality of American's largest city with an authenticity that made him the most important Social (or Urban) Realist painter of the time. While he was active in New York organizations aligned with the political Left, Soyer shielded his art from outside influences, captured life as it was, and let his paintings speak for themselves. The people and scenes he chose to portray, and the humanity with which he did so, speak to Soyer's benevolent character and to his heartfelt empathy for the indigent he came across, pictured, and even befriended.* In the mid-1930s, Soyer began tackling other aspects of urban life, less the unemployed homeless and more the working lower class, in particular young women, office or shop girls, and housewives. But during the first, dark years of the Depression, such as 1932 when half of New York City's manufacturing plants had closed and one in three New Yorkers was out of a job, Soyer headed to the Lower East Side, the Bowery, Union Square, and further South to the base of the Williamsburg Bridge, in order to chronicle a reality which few could have predicted or imagined.



Hardluckville aka *Hard Luck Town* or *Hard-Luck-on-the-River*, New York's largest *Hooverville*, circa 1932, East River between 8th & 10th Streets (photograph coll. museum of the city of new york)

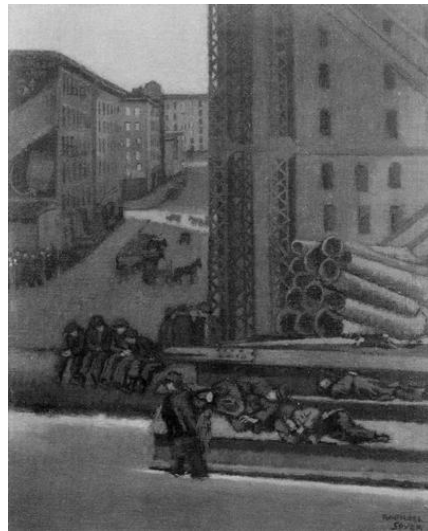


Reginald Marsh, *East 10th Street Jungle*, 1934
(coll. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut)

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.



Williamsburg Bridge, view from Lower East Side, Manhattan, circa 1904, upon its completion
(photograph coll. detroit publishing company)



Soyer, *Under the Williamsburg Bridge*, 1931
(coll. Jewish Museum, New York)

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 (coll. Jewish Museum, NY), 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 in April of 1929.



Soyer, *Men at the Mission*, 1935, oil on canvas, 11 x 17 inches

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."

When, around 1932, Soyer painted *Under the Bridge*, he was continuing the narrative of his 1931 *Under the Williamsburg Bridge* (coll. Jewish Museum, New York), a composition in which vagrant men, all identically dressed, loiter about the steel girders below the overpass. Some of them nap in what appears to be the glow of late afternoon sun. In Soyer's second painting, the viewer is once again *Under the Bridge*, only this time in the dead of Winter with the street (most likely Rivington) and sidewalks partially covered by snow and ice. On one side a row of horse-drawn carts reading "Surprise Laundry" lay in wait; on the other groups of homeless men, some recumbent, huddle beneath the colossal stone terminus of the Williamsburg Bridge. Like Walker Evans and Berenice Abbott, whose candid photography overlapped his canvases in time and venue, Soyer, in his own nascent, painterly style was documenting for posterity a bleak but consequential time in American history.



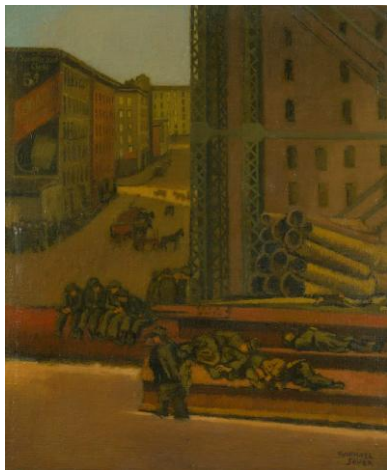
Raphael Soyer (photograph by Peter A. Juley & Son)

“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.” (Goodrich, Lloyd, *Raphael Soyer*, exhibition catalogue, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1967, p. 12)

* Raphael came to know many of the dispossessed he pictured, which accounts for both his ready access to and intimate portrayal of them, as well as for the recurring faces that appear in his paintings of the period. After sketching the impoverished, Soyer would sometimes invite them back to his studio for a more in-depth painting session, even furnishing them with a little money and a night’s lodging. For example, Soyer depicted the elderly homeless man Walter Broe, whom he first encountered picking up dropped coins through a subway grill using a long pole and chewing gum, numerous times. Soyer soon dignified the down-and-out Mr. Broe by introducing him to fellow painters, Reginald Marsh, Isabel Bishop, and Katherine Schmidt who also immortalized him in their own work.

Note

When giving *Under the Bridge* its title, Raphael Soyer omitted the name of the bridge depicted perhaps in order to maintain focus on the scene at hand rather than draw attention to the structure’s architecture. In reviewing photographic images of contemporary New York City bridges, the overpass he painted across the East River matches that of the Williamsburg Bridge, with its massive Manhattan terminus at Delancey Street in the heart of the Lower East Side. A year or so prior, Soyer painted the site specific *Under the Williamsburg Bridge* (coll. Jewish Museum, New York) in which its span over the river is not visible. The bridge was constructed during the final years of the 19th Century to facilitate transportation between Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and the Lower East Side, districts which were both experiencing explosions in their immigrant populations.



Raphael Soyer, *Under the Williamsburg Bridge*, 1931
Oil on composition board
23 7/8 × 19 7/8 inches
Collection of the Jewish Museum, New York