FORUM GALLERY

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Robert Fishko, *Director*

**RAPHAEL SOYER**
(1899-1987)



*Waiting At The Station*, c.1941
oil on canvas
18 x 14 inches
signed lower right "*RAPHAEL SOYER*"

**Provenance**:

The Artist
Associated American Artists Galleries, New York, NY
(the artist's dealer, 1940-55)
Private Collection, New York
Forum Gallery, New York, NY

**Literature**

Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*, H.N. Abrams, New York, NY, 1972, p. 123, Illustrated (as *Study for 'Soldiers Farewell'*)

**Essay**

"The drab theme of people sitting and waiting fascinated {Soyer}: the variety of human beings, and their moods of weariness, impatience or resignation. Related to this theme was a series during World War II of soldiers in Pennsylvania Station saying goodbye to their wives, mothers and sweethearts. These were practically the only reflection of the war in his paintings, proving again how a-political his art was."
(Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*, H.N. Abrams, New York, 1972, p. 70)

Raphael Soyer spent the 1930s portraying the effects of the Great Depression in New York City. He painted destitute men, unemployed and homeless, as well as the so-called shopgirl, i.e., the low-wage, working woman. His approach was apolitical yet wholly empathic towards his subject matter and the individuals he chose to depict. As the decade concluded, Soyer painted *A Railroad Station Waiting Room* (c. 1940), a complex composition consisting of several rows of people sitting and waiting for a train at the 125th Street stop in

East Harlem. The realistic setting reflects Soyer's ongoing interest in the life of New York's working class, and engendered a number of thematically related paintings in the 1940s. Included in the group of railroad related paintings is *Waiting at the Station,* where this time the setting is the platform of Pennsylvania Station at 34th Street. The composition is divided by the end-frame of a broad, double-sided wooden bench. On its right side a seated man reads a newspaper; on its left three very distinct people sit side-by-side. Closest to the foreground is a young lady wearing an orange head-scarf and mittens, followed by a youth in military uniform clasping his hands, and finally by a middle-aged gentleman wearing a Fedora. Common to all three passengers is their straight-ahead, deadpan gaze. Soyer often rendered the people in his paintings with blank expressions as if they were lost in their own thoughts, leaving the viewer to divine what was on their minds. Eyeing the three travelers from the far bench in the background is a small man wearing coat, tie, and hat in Soyer's own likeness. The consummate observer of others, Soyer may well have included himself in the picture, something he was known to do.

Beyond and to the left of the seated passengers in *Waiting at the Station* is a heartrending portrayal of a young couple embracing. Outfitted like his fellow soldier sitting on the bench, the young man is heading off for service and most likely action in World War II. His beloved clings to him, her arms flung about his neck while, perhaps in an effort to gently release himself from her grasp, he has placed his left hand on her shoulder. His mouth is open, as though he is telling her he loves her and that he will be okay. The poignancy of their moment together contrasts with the emotionlessness of the foreground figures in a composition in which Soyer united the weariness and isolation of modern urban life with the dread and grief of war.

As Germany swiftly invaded France in the Summer of 1940, popular support grew for bringing back the Draft, waived at the end of the first world war. Conscription was officially reinstated on September 16th in the form of the Selective Training and Service Act. By November, the very first recruits (ages 21-35) began entering military service, whereas widespread conscription occurred after December 7th of the following year, Pearl Harbor Day, when the inductee age was lowered to 18. While it is certainly possible that Soyer painted *Waiting at the Station* during the pre-war days of the Draft, it is more likely that he did so when substantial numbers of young men were being deployed to Europe and to the Pacific. This would date the work closer to Soyer's 1943 painting *Wives, Sweethearts and Mothers* and to his 1943 lithograph *Farewell **, both of which also display the distinctive pediment and clock of the identical Penn Station platform entrance in the background.

> "During World War II I spent many hours at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station in New York watching American soldiers go to war in Europe. I witnessed many moving scenes of soldiers bidding their mothers, wives, and sweethearts farewell." (Raphael Soyer to Ellen Landau, March 15, 1982; published Landau, Ellen G. *Artists for Victory*, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1983, p. 109)

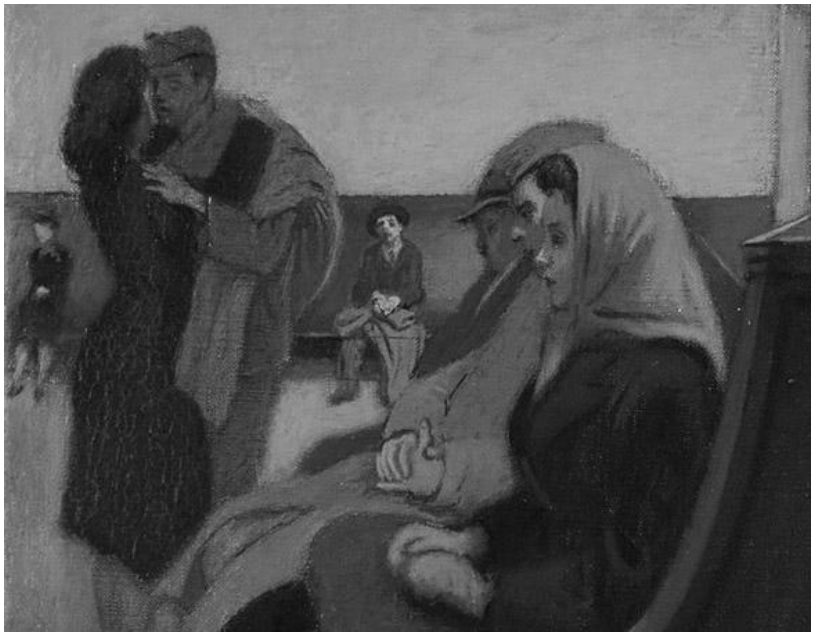
Soyer was not alone in representing young American soldiers bidding farewell to their sweethearts as they departed for war. The theme had been given considerable artistic attention during World War I, though not all painters shared Soyer's doleful tenor.

Portrayals varied greatly, ranging from lament to jingoism. In J.C. Leyendecker's 1917 *Woman Kissing Soldier Goodbye* a virile American warrior grasps both his rifle and his woman, a lover and fighter in a single propagandistic display. On the other hand, Alfred Eisenstaedt's touching photograph, *A Soldier's Farewell, Penn Station* (1944), is commensurate with Soyer's sentiment. In *Train Station* (1942), another oil painting in which Soyer chronicles the same topic, three couples exchange adieus as a woman in the background waves goodbye and another in the foreground dries her tearful eyes with a handkerchief. As with his other renditions, the presentation evokes tenderness and affection both for the men who leave as well as for the women who stay. In the early 1940s, he painted a number of pictures of solitary women, bereft at home at the same time their loved ones were suffering abroad, and in his Penn Station farewell scenes, Soyer left heroics for the battlefield and kept humanity center stage on the platform.

> "A woman has bid farewell to a loved one enrolled in the armed forces. At the moment of departure, the woman becomes a future survivor of months of silent prayers that may stretch into years of agonizing fears of uncertainty." (Henkes, Robert, *World War II in American Art*, McFarland Publishing, Jefferson, North Carolina, 2001, p. 43)

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> "During the war years, Raphael Soyer and his brother were both signers of a call to American artists and writers to convene a congress in defense of culture against Fascism. He exhibited in the ACA Gallery's *Artists in the War* show in 1942, and his lithograph *Farewell* won honorable mention in the planographic division of the Artists for Victory *America in the War* competition". (Landau, Ellen G. *Artists for Victory*, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1983, p. 107)



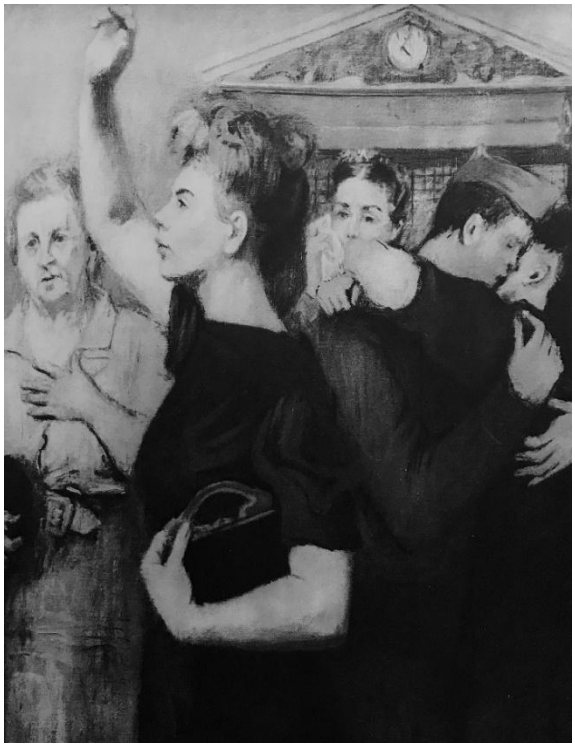
Soyer, *Waiting at the Station*, (detail) c. 1941 (Forum Gallery, New York)



Soyer, *A Railroad Station Waiting Room*, c. 1940
(coll. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)



Soyer, *Farewell,* 1943, lithograph



Soyer, *Wives, Sweethearts and Mothers*, 1942 (Private Collection)



Soyer, *Train Station*, 1943 (Private Collection)



Alfred Eisenstaedt, *A Soldier's Farewell, Penn Station*, 1944, silver gelatin print




J.C. Leyendecker, *Woman Kissing Soldier Goodbye*, 1917
(cover, *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 19, 1917)